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# Making Management Manageable: An Empirical Investigation into the Stress and Emotional Health of U.S. Hotel Managers

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study measures the amount of stress hotel managers feel on a daily basis. A total of 211 managers self-reported their stress levels using the 43-item Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). Results show that more than half of hotel managers report stress levels which are very likely to cause stress-related illnesses. The findings of this study are then compared to an earlier study done in 1998 and key differences are discussed. Implications and suggestions for the industry are provided.

**Key Words:** Hotel managers, stress levels, Social Readjustment Rating Scale, hospitality industry

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nearly 20 years ago, an investigation conducted by Sarabakhsh, Carson, and Lindgreen (1989a) showed that hospitality managers reported significantly greater stress and career interference with their personal and family life when compared with managers in other fields. Hospitality managers were also found at that time to have a lower overall quality of life than other managers in that study. Since then, a great deal of attention has been given to evaluating the specific aspects of hospitality managers' daily lives. Much of the research on the subject support the invariable reality that managers within the hospitality industry are often in work situations that place unusual demands on them that can cause stress and affect their emotional health. This is of concern as Gill, Flaschner, and Shachar (2006) report that stress leads directly to health issues, both physical (headaches, stomach problems and even heart attacks) and mental (anxiety and depression), resulting in a negative impact on commitment and performance (in addition to the employee health issues), and overall productivity for the organization. Specifically, research studies have uncovered that stress has been significantly linked with three key job related outcomes: reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment and increased turnover (Cleveland et al., 2007; Jamal and Baba, 2000; Leiter and Maslach, 1988; Savery and Luks, 2001; Um and Harrison, 1998). Further, hospitality managements' ability to serve their employees and guests has been found to be imperiled under higher levels of stress, ultimately impacting the organizations' bottom-line (Brymer, 1982; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007; Woods, Sciarini, and Johanson, 1998).

Some recommendations purposed in the past research, specific for hospitality managers, have already been made. Most have emphasized strategies and techniques aimed to improve managers' life satisfaction, including: delegation and sharing of responsibilities and authority with staff, helping employees to be more responsible for their performance, utilizing a Manager-On-Duty (MOD) concept of organizational management (especially in non-guest contact areas), implementing fundamental institutional changes in scheduling, building internal support systems for managers and employees, and encouraging managers and employees to take advantage of educational and therapeutic opportunities available to them (Sarabakhsh, Carson, and Lindgreen, 1989b). Some hospitality organizations have implemented either these techniques or training and development strategies to handle stress in one's life. However, emotional health research recommends that efforts at controlling stress must go beyond formal programs both by recognizing that managers need a suitable balance between their work and their private lives and by helping managers uncover and address the *causes* of stress in their lives (Scully, Tosi, and Banning, 2000). With

the intense levels of management stress prevalent in the field today, it is essential that hospitality companies help deal with the realities of the causes of stress in the lives of their managers before it becomes unmanageable.

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### *Purpose of Study*

The goal of this research is to uncover what causes stress in the lives of hospitality managers. Revealing such causes is critical because this information is needed to develop specific strategies to combat the problem. The 43-item Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) was used in this study to measure events that cause stress in the lives of hospitality managers. The SRRS was developed originally in 1967 and is considered one of the oldest, and most reliable, validated measures of evaluating stress (Banyard and Grayson, 1996; Hock, 1995; Scully et al., 2000). The measurement scale has been updated and validated several times over the years, most recently in 2000 (Scully et al.).

### *Evaluating the SRRS*

Almost forty years since its creation, the SRRS is the measurement tool chosen most frequently by researchers and practitioners to measure stress (Scully et al.). Hock identified nearly 150 research studies which utilized the SRRS. The SRRS is easy to understand and score as well as simple to administer (Scully et al.). Stress values are assigned to each of the 43 life events found on the scale (See Appendix 1). The values are assigned to each item based on the results of several studies supporting the apparent connection between life changes and illness (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). The higher the score on the SRRS, the more stress a manager feels in his/her life. A notable limitation of the SRRS is that the scale is a measure of the presence or absence of stressful events in a manager's life. As a result, it does not consider managements' reaction to stressful events. Sometimes actions taken by people to mitigate stress can be a more significant factor than the stressor itself (Scully et al.). For example, retirement, rated at 45 stress points, may be perceived as a negative event by one person but eagerly anticipated by another. Some have also pointed out that the scale is limiting because it is built solely around the concept of change, or stressful events, yet many people experience stress in their daily lives because of boredom, isolation, loneliness, ongoing tension in a family relationship, and failure to climb the career ladder – all factors that imply a notable absence of change (Scully et al.). In spite of these criticisms the scale is validated and has been useful in many research projects.

### *Measuring Stress Levels*

One interesting pattern consistent in the conclusions from the large body of researchers who have used the SRRS is that significant differences on stressors reported are rarely found among and within ethnic groups. For instance, Liberman and Frank (1980) found that whatever differences in ethnicity or cultural background exist among American Indians, Anglo-Americans and Hispanic Americans, these differences do not influence the results in the perceived stressfulness of life events on the SRRS scale. This finding was consistent when the scale was re-examined by Pine et al. (1985). In fact, not a single study has reported significant differences between cultures or ethnicities. In addition, no significant differences have been found with respect to age or gender. However the study by Sarabakhsh et al. (1989a) did find significant differences among managers with different levels of education and income. While several studies exist in the social sciences which use the SRRS scale, few have employed this reliable scale in hospitality management research. Sarabakhsh et al. (1989a, 1989b) investigated how hotel and restaurant managers working conditions affect their daily life. They published two articles on this topic. In both articles, results of the implementation of the SRRS are reported. Among their conclusions is that while restaurant managers' careers appear to contribute to stress in their personal life, these stressors are maximized in the lives of hotel managers participating in the study. Sarabakhsh et al. reported that hotel managers appear to be more likely to experience stress due to the number of hours worked per week as well as the requirement to work on weekends and holidays. Another study, published in 2007, found that work characteristics, work hours and emotional control were cited as the most prevalent stressors of hotel managers while the spouses of these managers reported that the number one stressor on the family was the unpredictable weekend and holiday work schedules (Cleveland et al.).

## **METHODS**

A total of 407 managers in the U.S. lodging industry were invited to participate in this research study. Those randomly selected participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous. Of those managers chosen to participate, 211 returned usable surveys for a current response rate of 52%. Each respondent completed the 43-item self-report SRRS measure designed to allow participants to describe the extent to which recent life experiences have caused stress in their lives. The managers responded to these items using a four-point scale (1=not at all part of my life; 2=only slightly part of my life;

3=distinctly part of my life or 4=very much part of my life). Upon completion, participants mailed surveys to the researchers in a postage-paid envelope.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Demographic and industry profile information of the respondents is detailed in Tables 1 and 2. Table 3 shows a comparison of 1998 and 2008 participant stress scores. Two figures appear prominent in this table. The first is the percentage of managers who have experienced stress levels of 500 or higher. As noted in Table 3, the percentage has increased by 169% in the last decade from 9.7% of respondents to 26.1% of respondents. Today, it appears that over one-fourth of hotel managers might be experiencing stress levels above 500. It is important to remember when reading this that stress levels above 250 are considered likely to cause stress-related illnesses.

**Table 1**  
**Description of Respondents' Hotels**

Size of Hotel	% of Respondents		Service Level	% of Respondents	
	1998	2008		1998	2008
100 rooms or less	2.0	8.5	Luxury	20.0	15.6
101 to 200 rooms	17.0	27.0	First Class	48.0	17.5
201 to 400 rooms	47.0	29.9	Mid-Market	29.0	39.8
401 or more rooms	34.0	34.6	Economy	3.0	27.0

**Table 2**  
**Description of Respondents (2008 study)**

Gender	% of Respondents	Age	% of Respondents
Male	77.7	35 or less	3.8
Female	22.3	36-45	42.7
		46-55	41.2
		56-65	12.3

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Hotel Managers in Each Scoring Range**

Scores	% of Respondents	
	1998	2008
0	12.9	1.4
1-100	12.9	11.4
101-150	9.7	11.8
151-199	16.1	7.1
200-300	12.9	17.5
301-400	9.7	8.1
401-500	16.1	16.6
500 or more	9.7	26.1

Table 4 shows a comparison of the ten most common stressors of respondents in 1998 and 2008. Four items are included in both lists. What is different between 1998 and 2008 is the tone of the other events. In 1998 the remaining six stressors were; business adjustments, change in responsibilities, change in personal habits, change in number of arguments with spouse, change in financial state and change in work hours. In 2008 the remaining stressors included a very different type of list than in 1998, namely; death of a close family member, death of a close friend, retirement, change in health of family member, mortgage, and son or daughter leaving home. In 1998, half of the other highly reported stressors were totally work-related while none of the six were work-related in 2008. The one

potential work-related inclusion in 2008 is retirement. However, this event causes stress because of a lack of work-related events, not an inclusion of them.

**Table 4**  
**Most Frequently Reported Stressors**

Items	% of Respondents (1998)
Holidays	56.7
Business adjustment	50.9
Outstanding personal achievement	43.3
Vacation	39.6
Change in responsibilities at work	39.6
Marriage	32.3
Change in work hours or conditions	30.2
Revision of personal habits	28.3
Change in number of arguments with spouse	24.5
Change in financial state	20.7

  

Items	% of Respondents (2008)
Marriage	50.2
Death of a close family member	49.3
Mortgage	48.8
Vacation	46.4
Holidays	45.5
Change in health of family member	35.5
Retirement	33.6
Outstanding personal achievement	33.6
Death of a close friend	25.6
Son or daughter leaving home	24.6

Table 5 reports stressors in 2008 by gender. As the reader will note, six stressors are common across gender. We also note that two items listed by female participants (gain of a new family member and pregnancy) are both obviously more likely to affect women than men.

**Table 5**  
**Most Frequently Reported Stressors by Gender (2008 study)**

Items	% of Respondents
	Male (n=164)
Death of a close family member	54.3
Holidays	51.8
Mortgage	48.8
Vacation	48.2
Marriage	47.6
Change in health of family member	45.7
Retirement	39.6
Outstanding personal achievement	33.5
Death of a close friend	30.5
Son or daughter leaving home	29.3

Items	% of Respondents
	Female (n=47)
Marriage	59.6
Mortgage	48.9
Vacation	40.4
Outstanding personal achievement	34.0
Gain of a new family member	31.9
Death of a close family member	31.9
Pregnancy	25.5
Holidays	23.4
Change in social activities	17.0
Change in responsibilities at work	17.0

Table 6 shows stressors by age group. These stressors appear to report events that are typical of the different age groups depicted. For instance, the youngest group reported items associated with that age (gain of new family member, marriage, pregnancy, trouble with in-laws) while those in the oldest age group included the following age-appropriate items; retirement, death of close family member, death of friend, change in health of family member, death of spouse, spouse.

**Table 6**  
**Most Frequently Reported Stressors by Age Group (2008 study)**

Items	% of Respondents
	35 or less (n=8)
Gain of a new family member	100.0
Marriage	100.0
Pregnancy	87.5
Trouble with in-laws	50.0
Death of a close family member	50.0

  

Items	% of Respondents
	36-45 (n=90)
Mortgage	66.7
Marriage	60.0
Vacation	53.3
Holidays	44.4
Death of a close family member	40.0

  

Items	% of Respondents
	46-55 (n=87)
Death of a close family member	51.7
Holidays	44.8
Change in health of family member	41.4
Vacation	39.1
Retirement	37.9

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Items	% of Respondents 56-65 (n=26)
Retirement	84.6
Death of a close family member	73.1
Death of a close friend	73.1
Change in health of family member	73.1
Death of spouse	69.2

Table 7 shows the percentage of respondents reporting each stress item. These are irrespective of gender and age group. Some events appear much more common in 2008 than in 1998. These appear to fall into a few categories, economy-related events, age-related events and work-related events. We were surprised to see the changes in events which appear consistent with changed economic conditions between the two studies include; worry about mortgage, mortgage balance, foreclosure of mortgage, business adjustment, fired at work, change in responsibilities at work, jail term, and less change to a different line of work. These appear to reflect the stress Americans feel as a result of the strained economy and recession of 2001-2008. In addition, lower percentages of respondents indicating “trouble with boss” as stressors may also indicate that the very negative current economy has convinced managers to actively seek to retain their jobs.

Some age-related events appear to be more likely among older people while some more likely among younger people. This seems logical given the bi-polar distribution of data. Increases in percentage of respondents that appear to depict the aging of managers include; death of a close family member, change in health of family member, retirement, death of a close friend, son or daughter leaving home, spouse begin or stop work, death of spouse, personal injury or illness. Additionally, some age-related events that fewer respondents reported in 2008 than 1998 also appear to be age-related, including; change in residence, and change to a different line of work, revision of personal habits, and trouble with boss. Age-related changes which appear to be consistent with the replacement of older managers with younger managers include; marriage, the decrease in personal achievements, change in social activities, change in responsibilities at work, divorce, marital separation, pregnancy, and trouble with in-laws.

**Table 7**  
**Percentage of Respondents Reporting Each Stress Factor**

Item	1998	2008
Marriage	32.3	50.2
Death of a close family member	17.0	49.3
Worry about mortgage	11.3	48.8
Vacation	39.6	46.4
Holidays	56.7	45.5
Change in health of family member	13.2	35.5
Outstanding personal achievement	43.3	33.6
Retirement	7.5	33.6
Death of a close friend	15.2	25.6
Son or daughter leaving home	7.5	24.6
Change in financial state	20.7	21.8
Change in eating habits	7.5	21.8
Change in work hours or conditions	30.2	19.9
Mortgage balance	11.3	19.9
Spouse begin or stop work	9.4	19.9
Death of spouse	1.2	19.0
Change in social activities	5.7	17.5
Business adjustment	50.9	16.1
Change in sleeping habits	13.2	15.6
Gain of a new family member	15.4	15.2

**Table 7 Continued.**

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Item	1998	2008
Personal injury or illness	3.6	15.2
Change in living conditions	13.2	13.7
Fired at work	5.6	13.7
Change in responsibilities at work	39.6	13.3
Change in number of family get-togethers	7.5	12.3
Divorce	3.0	10.9
Change in number of arguments with spouse	24.5	10.4
Marital separation	4.2	10.0
Change in church activities	9.4	9.5
Pregnancy	1.2	8.5
Trouble with in-laws	3.8	8.1
Revision of personal habits	28.3	7.1
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	1.9	6.2
Trouble with boss	15.1	5.2
Jail term	1.2	4.7
Change in recreation	7.5	4.7
Sex difficulties	7.5	4.3
Change in residence	13.2	3.3
Change in school	1.9	1.9
Change to a different line of work	13.2	1.4
Marital reconciliation	1.9	1.4
Begin or end school	5.7	0.0
Minor violation of the law	0.0	0.0

### *Discussion*

This study reported on stress levels of hotel managers in 2008 and compared those results to managers evaluated in 1998. As this paper reports, the differences are striking in some regards, notably the much higher stress scores in 2008 when compared to the already too-high scores in 1998. These results appear to clearly describe a condition in which the stress levels of hotel managers have gone up significantly. These increases also appear to apply to most managers, not only to certain groups and/or managers of certain types of properties. Therefore, these results appear to indicate that hotels need to do a lot more to reduce the stress levels of their managers. The alternative is that many of these managers might experience significant stress-related illnesses. Much more needs to be done by companies to reduce stress levels among these managers.

These illnesses cost substantial amounts of money. Depression, only one logical output of high stress levels, costs the U.S. economy more than \$26 billion dollars in 2000 alone, according to the Wall Street Journal (Munoz, 2003). The Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit organization which studies health-and work-related problems, noted that the average cost of health insurance per hour worked by each employee rose from \$1.60 per hour in 1999 to \$2.59 in 2007. This cost is divided amongst all employees, of course, not just managers. However, these data reflect the high cost business must carry for the health and well-being of its employees and managers. Kaiser also reported that the cost of healthcare for businesses exceeded 15% of total employee costs in 2007. This should be enough incentive for employers to take steps to reduce costs, but, according to our data, this has not been the case. Hospitality companies can save money by monitoring and improving the stress levels of managers and employees. There are ample remedies for stress discussed by others these companies can draw upon to reduce their costs. These remedies include everything from exercise classes, to smoking-cessation programs, to family assistance and more. Perhaps now that businesses have their backs to the wall because of the current recession they will, now, begin to address stress in significant ways.



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